

Dear Legislative Office Members,

My name is Natalia Tijaro Ovalle. I am Colombian medical graduate and a third year Internal Medicine resident physician at Yale New Haven Hospital. I am testifying in full support of the H.B. No. 6616 “An act concerning expansion of Husky health benefits to those ineligible due to immigration status”.

During my years as a medical professional, I have met countless of underserved patients. I met Maria in February 2021, while she was completing a crossword puzzle in her East Pavilion room, at Yale New Haven Hospital. She was a middle-aged woman with end-stage kidney disease who was admitted to the hospital for urgent initiation of dialysis in December 2020.

Medically, her hospital stay had been uncomplicated - she tolerated her dialysis sessions well and her volume and acid/base status had been optimized. Despite her readiness for discharge, she was still in the hospital for reasons beyond her medical care. She was an undocumented and uninsured immigrant who did not qualify for outpatient coverage of her dialysis in the state of Connecticut. She was told she only had two options: stay indefinitely in the hospital to receive inpatient dialysis or move out of Connecticut to apply for Medicaid coverage in New York or Massachusetts.

When I first entered her room, she smiled at me. Even though she had been in the hospital for over two months, her charisma had not faded. We connected immediately over our love for puzzles (and to be honest, for Mexican telenovelas). Soon, I learned about her grief for spending Christmas, a season close to her heart, away from her loved ones. I also learned about her husband, who had struggled to find a steady job for decades and, understandably, was hesitant to move out of state and risk his recent, hard-earned stability.

None of the options we were giving Maria worked for her, and it was time to seek expert-level help. Having had the fortune of working at Fair Haven Community Healthcare, where these situations are not uncommon, I knew whom to call. I contacted one of the skilled community health workers at Fair Haven, and we teamed up with the New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA) attorneys, who were able to build a case for Maria and helped her navigate a 6-month dispute to get her access to Medicaid.

A combination of advocacy by HUSKY 4 Immigrants and Unidad Latina en Acción (ULA), media attention, and political support resulted in the inclusion of outpatient dialysis in the “Emergency Medicaid” conditions for the state of Connecticut. This now allows undocumented immigrants to apply for health insurance in these life-saving situations. With H.B. No. 6616, all CT residents under the age of 26 would have access to medical services, regardless of their immigration status. This would not only benefit patients, who do not have to be critically ill to receive medical care, but ultimately our medical system, which ultimately absorbs the cost of lengthy hospital stays and expensive treatments for advanced conditions, like it happened in the case of Maria.

At the end of July 2021, Maria was discharged from the hospital, and since then she has been getting her dialysis near her home. We talk over the phone frequently; sometimes about her health, other times about puzzles, at times about telenovelas, and occasionally, about that East Pavilion room she hopes never to visit again.